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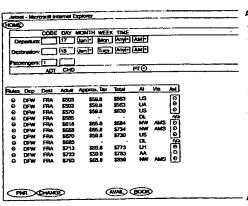
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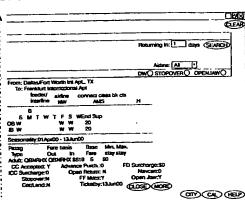
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(54) Title: REALTIME ONLINE TRAVEL INFORMATION AND RESERVATIONS SYSTEMS AND SERVICE



(57) Abstract: The present invention is a real-time online travel information and reservations system and service accessible through the Internet. It is designed to access, query, match and sort information from net fare (wholesale fare), customer reservation system, and tour operator system databases via an Internet interface.



REALTIME ONLINE TRAVEL INFORMATION AND RESERVATIONS SYSTEMS AND SERVICE

Field of the Invention

The present invention is a real-time online travel information and reservations system and service accessible through the Internet. It is designed to access, query, match and sort information from net fare (wholesale fare), customer reservation system, and tour operator system databases via an Internet interface.

Background of the Invention

The travel business is dependent on a relatively small number of Computer Reservation Systems (CRS) in order to gain access to databases that maintain air travel schedule and seat availability information, and to enable reservations. For example, one of these CRS's is "Sabre", which is part of the Sabre Group, a sister company of American Airlines. Sabre, along with the other CRS companies, provides a significant portion of the travel trade with the ability to look up and book the scheduled and net fares of the majority of the large scheduled air carriers in the world. The travel agency has access to typically one CRS via direct line connections and logins with an individualized city code. The travel agency enters into a contract with its chosen CRS for access to their system, and in general the agency get rebates from the CRS for hitting certain preagreed reservation volumes, and gets penalized for doing too many enquiries on the CRS without generating a reservation. Every time a reservation is made on the CRS, a Passenger Number Record (PNR) is generated. The airlines are billed a booking fee by the CRS for each airport to airport leg (segment) of a reserved flight. Individual airlines also have their own Airline Reservation Systems (ARS), e.g. British Airways' system is known as BABS. The CRS also provides to the user direct connections to the airline reservation systems.

There are two ways for a traveler to book a flight:

1. through the airline either in person, over the phone, or over the Internet; or

2. through a travel agent either in person, over the phone, or over the Internet.

The vast majority of bookings are still done through travel agents.

In the prior art, a traveler can contact a travel agent or airline, as well as conduct an Internet search. The travel agent will confirm the travel dates, departure/destination cities, and number of travelers. The travel agent may access hard copy price lists, a CRS (and ARSs), and other databases, or a wholesaler agency (consolidator) directly to find a list of air carriers that are applicable. The travel agent will then interact with the airline directly or through the wholesale travel agency, or through the CRS and other database systems to determine availability of flights, subject to the attendant restrictions for each air carrier and flight option.

In the prior art, a wholesale or retail travel agent would have to separately and sequentially access the several database systems, e.g. net fare databases for wholesale fares, tour operator systems for charter flights, a CRS and ARS's for scheduled and current seat sale fares, in order to completely answer a traveler's questions about all available lowest fares, routing, conditions, seat availability, etc.

When the traveler has agreed on a flight option, the travel agent will proceed to book the flight. At that point, payment can be applied and the flight reservation file or PNR can be completed. For a knowledgeable travel agent, this whole process of searching for and booking a reservation can take an average of 5 minutes but can easily exceed 20 minutes to do a thorough search in a tight availability market.

If the traveler conducts an Internet search for flights, they may log in to an Internet travel site such as Microsoft's Expedia. Expedia links to the same CRS (and ARSs) as a travel agent may use. This is essentially a do-it-yourself form of the travel agency process and begins by completing a login profile. One learns by trial and error to work one's way through the screens to

search for available flights and conduct a reservation. Significant time can be spent and one is not certain if the cheapest available fare has been booked. If too many inquiries are made through Expedia without making a booking, one may have their login profile removed. If one books through Expedia and wants to change the flight, one typically then has to deal with the airline directly.

- U.S. Patent 5,021,953 discloses a travel planner system which automatically constructs itineraries with available seats for a traveler's trip request which conform to pre-stored reasonableness standards which includes a satisfactory check on whether a connecting flight distance exceeds that of a possible direct flight by a preset distance or ratio.
- U.S. Patent 5,864,822 discloses a computer system and a method for permitting a consumer to more effectively make use of a variety of available benefits from a plurality of goods and service providers, wherein the benefits are offered specifically to those consumers having an association with one or more enabling organizations.
- U.S. Patent 5,897,620 discloses a method and apparatus for the sale of unspecified-time airline tickets representing a purchased seat on a flight to be selected later by the airlines for a traveler specified itinerary.
- U.S. Patent 5,832,451 discloses a method for managing travel service information which generates a business entity profile and individual profile for customers.
- U.S. Patent 5,839,114 discloses a database which stores data relating to each computer reservation system utilized by a travel agency and contains one or more informational portfolios that can be used to determine the computer reservation system preferences of various parties, such as, for example, an individual traveler, a business entity employing the traveler and the travel agency.

U.S. Patent 5,331,546 discloses a travel planner system which automatically constructs itineraries with available seats for a traveler's trip request which conform to pre-stored reasonableness standards which include a satisfactory check on whether a connecting flight distance exceeds that of a possible direct flight by a preset distance or ratio.

U.S. Patent 5,832,454 discloses a client side GUI reservation program which accesses a CRS session with basic availability and booking functionality using the default CRS responses.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention is a real-time online travel information and reservations system and service accessible through the Internet. It is designed to access, query, match and sort information from net fare (wholesale fare), customer reservations system, and tour operator system databases via an Internet interface.

It is an object of the present invention to provide a computer-implemented method of making travel arrangements over the Internet via a standard browser. This comprises receiving from a user information concerning a travel request, the information including at least dates of travel, destination/departure cities, and number of travelers (the travel input).

Based on the travel input, the system of the present invention displays a table of flight options sorted typically by price or any other pre defined criteria. The flight options are compiled first from a search on a private net fare database or contract management system. The results from this initial search then drives a further search within a CRS/ARS with predefined knowledge on the exact flight options that are to be evaluated for price and availability i.e. the net fares that are applicable from the first search.

A further search is then conducted within the CRS/ARS for scheduled airline (non net fare) options and availability, including any available seat sales. For some deployments, an additional search will be conducted within a tour operator system as well for charter flights.

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All available flight options from these searches are then compiled and listed for the user and published within the user's Internet browser, denoting the net fare, scheduled fare, and if applicable, charter fare flight options.

It is a further object of the invention to verify seat availability based on the dates of travel and said destination. It is a further object of the invention to allow the user to confirm their travel selection. Another object of the invention is to allow the user to apply payment to book a ticket.

It is an object of the present invention to use the system and service for Air Travel, Trains, Cars and other forms of transportation, Hotels, Cruises and Insurance. The present invention is developed for interactive travel booking websites for access by both professional travel agents as well as websites designed specifically for the general public.

It is an object of the present invention to automate and expedite the booking of reservations by wholesale (consolidator) travel agents and their retail and business travel agent customers, and directly by their consumer customers. It is an object of the present invention to offer the traveler a system that shows the best fares from the selection of data sources for which seats are available, plus all details and restrictions.

It is an object of the present invention to allow many travel options to be evaluated simultaneously, such as evaluating several flights simultaneously. The timesavings from this approach is significant. The system of the present invention can analyze many different routings and fare options applicable from the private net fare search within the CRS simultaneously, without increasing the wait time for the user. For example, a typical task, such as searching for various net fare and scheduled flight availability, could take a professional travel agent 5-20 minutes. This same task could be accomplished by the present invention in 30-45 seconds.

It is an object of the present invention to enable the user to book travel itineraries with the appropriate class selection, via points, feeder airline, interline carriers, gateways, stopovers, etc. It is a further object of the system to take into account when booking certain conditions, such as travel blackout periods.

It is a further object of the invention to monitor flight requests from the users and map this against completed bookings, in order to generate useful productivity information for the management of the travel agency.

Brief Description of the Drawings

FIG. 1 is an example of an opening travel input screen.

FIG. 2 is an example of travel input criteria inputted.

FIG. 3 is an example of an availability screen from the travel search.

FIGS. 4A and 4B, when joined at match line A-A, is an example of a selected flight's rules screen.

FIGS. 5A and 5B, when joined at match line A-A, is an example of a selected flight's segments screen.

FIGS. 6A and 6B, when joined at match line A-A, is an example of a selected flight's booking screen.

FIGS. 7A and 7B, when joined at match line A-A, show a first screen illustrating an example of a confirmation screen.

FIGS. 7C and 7D, when joined at match line A-A, show a second screen illustrating an example of a confirmation screen.

FIG. 8 is an example of a net fare contract management system.

Description of Preferred Embodiments

The following are a list of features available with the present invention for airline reservations. Each of these features can be applied to any type of reservations system, such as for transportation or lodging where a reservation is required.

In an embodiment of the present invention, the system allows a user a high speed entry screen to capture travel dates, destination, the number of passengers and categories (child, senior, etc.), airline preference, requested stopover and different return city (open jaw) request. In a preferred embodiment, the system also provides a calendar GUI to assist in

determining the travel dates. In a preferred embodiment, the destination can be searched by key letters to retrieve either the city or city airport code.

The system of the present invention allows a user to find the best net fare and scheduled prices for the dates and itinerary selected (travel input). The system of the present invention takes the travel input and firstly searches on a private net fare database to determine applicable flight options. The private net fare database manages the myriad of net fare contracts that the applicable wholesaler to the user of the system has negotiated with its various airline suppliers. Once the applicable net fares that match the travel input are determined, the system then queries the CRS system live to determine if there are seats available for these pre-defined applicable flight options, after evaluating whether all of the net fare restrictions and conditions are met. In a preferred embodiment, the system also searches for applicable scheduled (non net fare) flight options by querying the CRS with the travel input as its search criteria.

In a preferred embodiment, all available flight options are displayed in order sorted by price. In a preferred embodiment, if there are seats available, a "select" button is displayed at the end of the pricing line which opens a window to view the flight details.

In an embodiment of the present invention, once the flight details are displayed, the user can select both an out bound and a return flight. In a preferred embodiment, the system provides a window to collect passenger name data and then displays the PNR confirmation record from the issuing CRS and airline once a booking is made. In the booking process the transaction is actually done with the host airline ARS.

In a further embodiment, the user can apply payment at the time of booking or at a later date prior to the ticketing deadline. In a preferred embodiment the payment module accepts either checks or credit cards and allows delivery options for ticket delivery.

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Additionally, this module also provides the user with the ability to purchase various types of trip insurance.

In one embodiment of the present invention, the Passenger Number Record, PNR, is finished using an automated process. This finishing process which includes adding several fields of information to the reservation is required for the completion of the booking process and to support the downstream ticketing and accounting functions. In a preferred embodiment the PNR is finished with no errors and the system queues it to the correct location in approximately 10-40 seconds.

In a preferred embodiment, the system of the present invention allows an administrative user to search for and access any PNR's booked within their agency, branch or by individual, depending on preference. The PNR can be accessed by date, travelers name, issuing agent, destination, locator number or any other method known in the industry. Payment onto an existing PNR can also be applied from this screen.

In one embodiment, the system of the present invention generates real time data concerning all aspects of the users' interaction with the system. For example "look to book" ratio's by agent, branch office, destination, etc. which display the percent of sales made compared to the overall search activity.

In a preferred embodiment, the system of the present invention interfaces to a variety of net fares systems. The invention uses a state of the art contract management system to manage net fares. In a preferred embodiment, the contract management system provides a flexible interface between the wholesaler client and the system. For example, a wholesaler's user can add new contracts with creative use of feeder and interline carriers, manage block inventory, or add complex discount and commission schemes in real time. After the contract

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is updated, the next user request on the system uses the new information if applicable to the travel input.

In a preferred embodiment, the system of the present invention allows a selected group of users to monitor in near real time, the activity on their site. For example, it displays what users are active, what city pair searches have been conducted, what percentage of business has been closed (by agent, company or destination), what PNR's have been issued and what payment records have been applied.

In a preferred embodiment, the system of the present invention provides user data base functionality to store both client and corporate information.

In a preferred embodiment, the present invention will operate an Internet based travel and hospitality booking system, which will comprise the following services:

- Allow the user to login over the World Wide Web (the "web") to the system, setting up a user profile which can determine which features will be activated during a session.
- II. Accept input detailing requested city pairs, travel dates, airlines, open jaw city, stopover city, number of passengers and return or one way.
- III. Using the above travel input, execute a search for the appropriate fares from a net fare database.
- IV. The available net fares are displayed in a sorted order (based upon lowest price).

 Each line of the net fares list has been evaluated for availability and for a potentially lower published price. Available published fare flights are displayed (if desired by the client), and are highlighted in the sorted order of the queue. If availability is found, a button at the end of a particular flight option is displayed

which, when activated, displays a screen of outbound and return flights appropriate to the flight option.

- V. The user may select the outbound and return flights and then activate the book button, which automatically books the selected itinerary and then prompts the user for passenger name input.
- VI. The system of the present invention will transact availability and booking with the appropriate Pseudo City and CRS applicable to the client travel agency.
- VII. The travel agency file is read and automatically loaded into a PNR record.
- VIII. The user can designate an e-mail address or fax number different from the file, to which the itinerary will be sent.
- IX. The PNR file will be sent through for ticketing within the agency environment.
 This will be accomplished by inputting specified lines within a specified format into the PNR and issuing the appropriate agency commands.
- X. The system will have automated ticketing as a function.
- XI. The appropriate CRS commands will also be issued to drive the Subscriber back office functions.
- XII. Business Reporting this screen allows search based retrieval of PNR's by user, time, destination, booking agent or agency, PNR number and date issued, as well as certain scanned reports that may be defined by the client.

In a preferred embodiment, the GUI (General User Interface) is a web based client that runs on a 4.X or 5.X version of either the Netscape or Microsoft Internet Explorer browser. In a preferred embodiment, the GUI is extremely lightweight by putting as much of the processing back on the server. The GUI can consist of HTML and Java script. The GUI should be kept light because many of the travel agent PC's are recycled Sabre or Apollo sets

and as such are minimally configured. In a further embodiment, the system manages the user sessions through gateways as opposed to allowing the users to initiate their own sessions to the CRS's which would be problematic for security.

In a preferred embodiment, an Informix Database is used. The database stores data, including contract data, client records, booking records, and user profiles. The database also stores the processes, for example, the GUI does not talk directly to the backend API's (Application Programming Interface), but rather writes to a particular table within the database that is read by the API. This allows the process to be asynchronous. In a preferred embodiment, all processes are asynchronous. The database provides the coordination of those processes. The Informix Database allows safe and robust replication of the database between multiple servers.

In a preferred embodiment, the API Library uses C and C++ code, and communicates to a variety of systems, both Mainframes and Unix servers, and emulates a user's interaction with that system. Layered on top of this functionality is a work manager which essentially coordinates the efforts of the various individual user processes.

In a preferred embodiment, each of the above components can connect and execute with multiple components in different locations. For example, a user can connect with the GUI at more than one server location, the GUI can connect with several different databases in the event of failure at one of the servers, and the API's can execute on remote machines in the event of mainframe connection failure at a particular site.

Figures 1-7 illustrate an example of a system according to the present invention for searching and booking an airline flight. The system may have a password for travel agent or traveler protection. As shown in Figure 1 a travel agent, after logging into the system, views an opening screen. The opening screen has fields for Departure, Destination, date and time,

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airline, number of passengers, one way or roundtrip, and a toggle for stopovers and open jaw city.

A travel agent then inputs the travel criteria as illustrated in Figure 2. Once the information is entered, the system of the present invention searches and sorts available flights based on the inputted travel criteria, as illustrated in Figure 3. The flights are displayed by departure, destination, fare, approximate tax, total, airline, via gateway, and availability. The system lists specific rules for each selected flight as shown in Figure 4. Once a flight is chosen, the program lists specific flight information for the selected flight as shown in Figure 5. The program then gives the travel agent the option to book the flight. At this time the travel agent can also book the flight to confirm the reservation. If the ticketing is done through a third party travel agent, credit is given to the agent booking the flight at this time. Once the flight is booked, the travel agent can then pay for the flight. Figure 6 illustrates the initiation of a booking. The travel agent will receive a confirmation number and specific contract details as shown in Figure 7. Figure 8 illustrates a separate contract management system that allows an agent or wholesaler to maintain their specific net fare airline contracts and their attendant restrictions and conditions.

Any reservation system can be used with the present invention. Although the present invention has been described in relation to particular preferred embodiments thereof, many variations and modifications and other uses will become apparent to those skilled in the art. It is preferred, therefore, that the present invention be limited not by the specific disclosure herein, but only by the appended claims.

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Claims

A computer-implemented knowledge-based method of making travel arrangement,
 comprising:

receiving from a user information concerning a travel request, said information including at least dates of travel and departure/destination of travel;

retrieving flight options applicable to said information from a private net fare database;

determining the availability of the flight options within a Customer Reservation System;

simultaneously determining availability of any scheduled flight options within the same Customer Reservation System;

displaying best prices for said travel request based on said dates of travel and said destination.

- The method of claim 1 wherein the knowledge based method includes simultaneously determining availability of charter flight options within a secondary Customer Reservation System.
- The method of claim 1 wherein said knowledge-based method verifies seat availability based on said dates of travel and said destination and retrieved knowledge from the net fare data.
- 4. The method of claim 1 wherein said knowledge-based method displays restrictions associated with each travel request.
- 5. The method of claim 1 wherein a user can confirm a travel selection.
- 6. The method of claim 1 wherein several travel options are evaluated simultaneously.
- 7. An online travel information and reservations system comprising;

an interface with a net fare database;

a contract management system within the net fare database;

a database to store client information;

said system allowing a user to log in over the web;

said system receiving input detailing dates of travel and departure/destination of travel;

said system retrieving flight options relating to said input from said net fare database;

said system determining availability of the flight options within a Customer Reservation

System;

said system simultaneously determining availability of any scheduled flight options within said Custom Reservation System;

said system displaying best prices based on said dates of travel and said departure/destination of said travel.

12. The system of claim 11 wherein said system is further interfaced to a tour operator database.

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